The Great Labor Uprising of 1877

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Cover: Assault by troops on strikers in Baltimore, as depicted in *Harper's Weekly*

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PREFACE

In 1876, as the nation prepared to celebrate the centennial of American independence, an economic depression was entering its fourth year; millions of Americans were unemployed, and for those who were still working, wages—already at starvation levels—were being cut in half. In New York City, where one-quarter of the work force was without jobs, meetings of the unemployed, called to "consider how we are to get work, food, clothing, and shelter," were brutally attacked by the police. After one such onslaught, at which men, women, and children were beaten without any warning, John Swinton, the editor of the *New York Sun,* warned:

> The power of money has become supreme over everything. It has secured for the class who control it all the special privileges and special legislation which it needs to secure its complete and absolute domination. . . . This Power must be kept in check. It must be broken or it will utterly crush the people. . . .[1]

Little wonder, then, that the *National Labor Tribune,* a weekly published in Pittsburgh, questioned whether the approaching one hundredth birthday of the nation's independence would have any meaning for American workers. At one time, it said, it might have been possible to celebrate, for America was then "the star of the political Bethlehem which shone radiantly out in the dark night of political misrule in Europe. The masses of the old world gazed upon her as their escape." Men in America could be "their own rulers"; "none could or should become their masters." But industrialization had created a nightmare:

> The dreams have not been realized. . . . The working people of this country . . . suddenly find capital as rigid as an absolute monarch. . . . Capital has now the same control over us that the aristocracy of England had at the time of the Revolution. We have the greatest work to do ever given to men. As our forefathers had the regal power and its proud aristocracy to control and limit, so have we, now, the combined power of capital, protected by monopolies, defended by government and press, to limit and control.
>
> The workers should remember,
> That we are in a land that's free,
> We have shaken off the British yoke,
> And left her tyranny.[2]

According to the *Chicago Workingman's Advocate*, the centennial pointed up the need for "another revolution, as essential today as that inaugurated in 1776."[3]

In the hot mid-July of 1877, exactly one year after the celebration of America's one hundredth birthday, with the nation prostrate, a general railroad strike developed into a national conflagration that brought the country closer to a social revolution than at any other time in its century of existence except for the Civil War.

On Tuesday, July 16, 1877, railroad workers at Martinsburg, West Virginia, went out on strike against still another wage cut imposed by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. As the militia was mobilized and violence broke out, the strike extended up the B & O line and spread rapidly to other lines. Other workers came to the support of the railroad strikers, and by the weekend angry crowds of workers were attacking the railroads and fighting with militia in the cities of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The local militia generally sided with the strikers, and, for the first time since Andrew Jackson's administration, federal troops were called in to suppress a strike.

Almost before the public was aware of what was happening, the huge contagion had spread as far as Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City,

and then on to San Francisco. Within a few days, one hundred thousand men were on strike in the first nationwide labor upheaval in history. All the main railway lines were affected, and even the employees of some Canadian roads joined the strike. Headlines blared out: "The Movement Rapidly Extending In All Directions" and "The People Excited and Agitated From Ocean to Ocean."

The railroad strikes served as a fuse, carrying the spark of rebellion to other workingmen, who, if they were working, were suffering from wage cuts, and to the unemployed multitudes in the great cities. In several cities, the original strike on the railroads expanded to many other industries, and in St. Louis it spread into such a systematically organized and complete shutdown of all industry that it became the first truly general strike in history.

Although the Great Strike was spontaneous and unorganized—it had nothing in the nature of central leadership and direction—this first nationwide rebellion of labor frightened the authorities and the upper classes as nothing before in our history. On July 24, John Hay, soon to become assistant secretary of state, wrote in alarm to his wealthy father-in-law: "Any hour the mob chooses it can destroy any city in the country—that is the simple truth."[4]

Even the Harmonists, in their utopian community at Economy, some sixteen miles south of Pittsburgh—one of the storm centers—wondered "whether this reign of terror marked the beginning of the harvest-time spoken of in Scripture . . . when 'the Heavens and earth, which are now by that same sword of God kept in store, reserved unto fire against the Day of Judgment and perdition of ungodly men.'"[5] A contemporary labor paper called the Great Strike "the Beginning of a Revolution," and predicted that "the occurrences during the last portion of July, 1877, will, in the future history of this country, be designated as the beginning of the second American Revolution, which inaugurated the independence of Labor from Capital."[6] Joseph A. Dacus, the St. Louis newspaperman whose *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States* is one of the three contemporary "potboilers" published on the subject within a year, noted that the upheaval startled the entire world, drowned out the noise

of the war in the Balkans and elsewhere, and drew "exclusive attention to the social ferment on this side of the Atlantic unparalleled in the annals of time."[7] John Swinton, the socially conscious journalist who, like Dacus, saw the strike at first hand, called it so unprecedented that there was "nothing like it in any history whatsoever."[8]

The Great Strike has been discussed in histories of the labor movement in the United States, in general histories of the nation, in histories of the railroad industry, and in works devoted to strike struggles. Its full story throughout the nation, however, was not made available until 1959, when Robert V. Bruce's painstakingly researched *1877: Year of Violence* was published. That work, which was the product of three years of research in more than one hundred libraries, is a major contribution to the history of American industrial society. Nevertheless, it is marred by several weaknesses. For one thing, by dealing with the strikes' events chronologically, instead of by railroad lines or cities, Bruce leaves the reader bewildered as to the continuity of the strike in any one area. One must constantly turn from one chapter to another for an understanding of the outbreak of a particular strike, its development, and for its final outcome. In between, the picture tends to become confused by the discussion of events on other railroads and in other cities.

In the present work, I have followed a topical organization, but, in order to retain the dramatic impact of the Great Strike's development day by day, I have included as an appendix a chronology of its events.

Since Bruce's work was published, several monographs, dissertations, and articles appearing in scholarly journals have shed additional light on both the national and local aspects of the tremendous struggle, and have pointed up weaknesses in his interpretation. These studies, together with my own research into contemporary sources, have convinced me that there is need for another all-inclusive book on this subject, especially as we approach the centennial of the great labor upheaval.

During the Great Strike, the major part of the country's trans-

portation system and thousands of industries dependent on it were brought to a halt. In addition to the four major trunk lines—the Baltimore & Ohio, the Pennsylvania, the Erie, and the New York Central & Hudson—scores of other lines were compelled to cease operations: for example, to mention just a few, the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western, the Indianapolis & St. Louis, the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton, the Ohio & Mississippi, the Missouri, Kansas & Texas, the Texas & Pacific, the Union Pacific, the Northern Pacific, the Northern Central, the Wabash, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, the Canadian Southern, the Grand Trunk of Canada, the Great Western of Canada, the Central of New Jersey, and the Louisville & Nashville. It is impossible to deal with the events on all of the lines and in all of the cities through which these lines ran. I have, therefore, restricted myself to a discussion of the events on those lines and in those cities which were the key areas of struggle.

Since the writings of the British historians George Rudé, Eric Thompson, and Eric J. Hobsbawm have begun to have an impact on our scholarship,[9] there has been an increasing tendency on both sides of the Atlantic, in discussing popular uprisings (even those since the Industrial Revolution), to use the words *crowds* and *crowd actions* instead of *mobs,* with the latter's unfavorable implication. It is becoming widely accepted that in most cases these actions were not mindless riots, but rather reflections of the economic, political, and social grievances, needs, and aspirations of the particular group of participants. Throughout this work, therefore, I have avoided the use of the term *mob* (except as employed by contemporaries), and have used instead the word *crowd.*

In any work on the Great Strike of 1877, one must seek to avoid the tendency to view it as a riot rather than as a strike,[10] or if as a strike, as only a railroad strike.[11] More serious, perhaps, is the tendency to view it as just another labor action born out of the frustrations of a depression, and one that disintegrated into random mob violence. Norman J. Ware was one of the first writers on the Great Strike who saw the inadequacy of such a view and who referred to the great upheaval as a social rebellion—"amounting al-

most to a revolution without revolutionizing intent." Ware also understood that the strike marked the presence, for the first time, of a distinct labor consciousness and raised in a credible way, for the first time, the possibility of a viable class analysis of American society.[12] Bruce, on the other hand, continued the tradition of viewing the uprising as a series of strikes that gave way to violence and lawlessness, and of persistently referring to "the mob" as ever ready to engage in such activities.[13] (It is a tribute to Samuel Yellen that, writing thirty years before George Rudé, he took conscious note of this pitfall and avoided the indiscriminate use of the words *the mob* and *tramps.*)[14] However, Bruce does pick out the faces in "the mob" and does convey a clear sense of the goals, behavior, and underlying beliefs of the crowd as a whole—the elements that Rudé suggests are key to a proper understanding of mass actions.[15]

Still another tendency that one must avoid is that of viewing the Great Strike as a full-blown insurrection which, but for a quirk of fate, would have produced a socialist America; or to insist that 1877 was a "mass strike" leading to virtual insurrection and with revolutionary potential.[16] That there were distinct insurrectionary and revolutionary elements in the Great Strike will become abundantly clear below. But it will also become evident that this characteristic did not apply in many areas affected by the strikes, and that at no point did the workers have either the power or the leadership to have transformed the strikes into a revolutionary seizure of the economy or the state.

The historian Herbert Gutman has recently alluded to the "little understood 1877 railroad strikes and riots."[17] It is my hope and belief that the present work will help to make them better understood.

In the preparation of this work, I have had the assistance of the staffs of many libraries and historical societies, both here and abroad. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Watt P. Marchman, director of the Hayes Memorial Library in Fremont, Ohio, for his assistance in the use of the Rutherford B. Hayes Papers; Anne-Mitte Kurkeby, of the University of Copenhagen Library, and Per Pio, of Det Kongelige Bibliotek in Copenhagen, for assistance in tracking

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